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ABSTRACT

Kentucky has witnessed many changes in educational administration. An assessment of those changes, with a focus on school boards, was done. School boards are not efficient bodies and this is not a problem. If efficiency was the top concern, then minimizing time and costs would be dominant and schools would suffer. School boards are not particularly elite or expert forums and but this is preferable since such boards are forums for public interest. Finally, school boards are regarded as democratic, but by no means are they apolitical. Boards are the middle ground between public and private interests; the focus on contracts and personnel is probably coopted by communities or educators. Micropolitics permeate school boards; the democratic process and purpose of schooling demand micropolitical outlets such as school boards. Values for democracy perpetuate micropolitics to the point that school-site management offers another outlet for micropolitics. School-site management is not only effective in the micropolitical sense, it has spawned a new definition of local control: local school councils. (RJM)

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Are School Boards an effective means of school governance?
A micropolitical perspective

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Introduction

I want to begin my remarks with some concessions about the nature of boards. To do that I address the question: What do we mean by effective? And I answer, of course, effective is not the same thing as efficient; nor is it the forum for elite or expert advice; and finally while school boards may be a form of local democracy, by that definition they are not apolitical. I conclude by explaining how micropolitics permeate the status of local school boards today using the example of the state with which I'm most familiar: Kentucky. My position is that democratic processes and purposes of schooling demand micropolitical outlets such as school boards. Further, I contend that our values for democracy perpetuate micropolitics to the point that school site management offers another outlet for micropolitics. School boards are not only effective in the micropolitical sense, they have spawned a new definition of local control ---- local school councils.

First concession: school boards are not efficient.

School boards are not an efficient body nor are they engaged in management efficiencies, but that's not a problem. Education is a labor-intensive enterprise. Learning depends on the relationships surrounding the acts of teaching and learning. Otherwise we wouldn't spend so much time concerned about school climate and culture, teacher morale, and student disengagement. If we were concerned only with efficiency, we'd simply concentrate on minimizing the time and other costs involved in delivering instruction. Instead, we are engaged in national debates about increasing time in school using coincidental information that nations that performing better on international achievement measures require more time in school. I submit that boards are not particularly efficient, but I do so arguing that despite a dominant U.S. cultural value for efficiency in other enterprises, efficiency is a low priority in education.

Second concession: schools boards are not particularly elite or expert forums.

They aren't, and they aren't supposed to be. School boards are forums for the public

EA029396

interest to be guarded and expressed in schools. Teachers and administrators, while stockholders in public education, are not the majority stockholders. They may serve as expert consultants to the majority, but by definition, teachers and administrators — a community minority — are not the final arbitrators of the majority public will. It is a ironic outcome of schooling that although educators possess more education than the average member of their communities, they don't understand the fundamental concept of majority rule over the concept of elite rule.

School boards are democratic, but not apolitical.

School boards are a "little d", democratic forum for the common citizen to express their desires to the elites of schools — teachers and administrators. School boards are an interesting example of a "check & balance" in the continual "little d", democratic struggle for equilibrium among competing interests. The competing interests in this situation are the general goals held by those with no children in school (these days that's not just a growing number of taxpayers in our graying population, but teachers and administrators as well) — and the specific goals held by all parents for their children. In addition, since the advent of collective bargaining, the debate has shifted from general and specific goals for children to general and specific goals for workers in schools.

School boards are the only public forum where public and private interests are openly debated. But because boards are the middle ground between public and private interests, they are anything but non-partisan (in the "little p" and sometimes the "big P", party-sense).

The fact that boards have been diverted from attention to "true" educational issues, depending on your perspective of what a true issue is, is a prime example of democracy at work. That is, boards that focus on contracts and personnel are probably coopted — a micropolitical process — by either their communities or their educators. Communities want jobs. Educators, despite some loud public protests to the contrary, like boards that attend to busses, bonds, and business, because they can maintain their "expert" status in the school walls. In other words, boards that are diverted from the core of education — instruction and curriculum — may insulate the educators to such decisions.

Kentucky

In my state, the degree to which school boards had been coopted in some communities is well-documented. There were persistently flagrant ethical violations of boards members and fiscal mismanagement. So one feature of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act was revision of governance structures. This included new nepotism laws — yet, nothing was done about cronyism — and the creation of school-based decision making councils which have enormous powers to construct policy on curriculum and instruction. SBDM Councils include parents, teachers, and principals. And these are not apolitical bodies either. Moreover, the presence of SBDM Councils have not cleared up the ethical and fiscal problems in our most notorious school districts. However, there is evidence that SBDM Councils in those districts have been able to concentrate on the core of education — teaching and learning — despite the ongoing shenanigans in their local board offices.

Nevertheless, while principals dreaded the increased involvement and scrutiny of both teachers and parents, they are generally satisfied with the role of councils. Teachers are fairly satisfied, but not as much as principals. Parents are the least satisfied. And what we see in this litany of satisfaction is the pecking order of councils — a political feature, if you will. However an individual is placed on this pecking order, when given the opportunity to disband their councils, few have chosen to do so (less than 10 %). I interpret this as evidence that despite the pecking order, most feel that SBDM is an accessible forum, perhaps more accessible than local school boards.

So in Kentucky, we have democratized school governance to a new degree. Local control is now found literally at each school house door. The democratization of schools is, by definition, a proliferation of political processes. Part of this struggle is a redefinition of the nature of forum provided by school boards. We are only now beginning to see new board roles emerging in Kentucky. We are in a state of flux produced by increased political participation in public discussion of schooling. If you haven't figured it out yet — I think that's a good thing.